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# “Waiting for the White Man to Fix Things:” Rebuilding Black Poverty in New Orleans

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*This paper revisits William Julius Wilson's thesis that class has surpassed race in significance of impact on African Americans. Our study uses qualitative data from a three-year ethnographic study of 40 largely low-income families in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. We also include a review of the recent U.S. Census study assessing New Orleans's current economic state. Participants in our study viewed race and class as major factors in four areas: (1) immediately following the devastation; (2) during relocation to other communities; (3) during the rebuilding process; and (4) historically and structurally throughout New Orleans. Our analysis concludes that racism is still a major factor in the lives of people of color. Further, for the poorest African Americans, race and class are inextricably linked and function as a structural barrier to accessing wealth, resources, and opportunities. The results have been a reproduction of the economic disparities that have historically plagued New Orleans.*

*Key words: Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans, race, class, African Americans, low income, poverty*

Images of the great physical devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 were less powerful for many than the overwhelming visual evidence that a specific group of individuals were bearing the brunt of the devastation: poor Black Americans. It was clear from the images presented in the media that African Americans were disproportionately affected by the hurricane. Merely on a visual level, the media

images projected a vision of concentrated poverty that suggested a developing country and racial segregation that harkened back to the pre-Civil Rights Era. Hurricane Katrina thrust to the forefront the undeniable reminder of the most entrenched, structural, and complicated racial stratification that this country very reluctantly owns.

In this paper, we revisit William Julius Wilson's (1978) thesis that class has superseded race in significance of impact on African Americans. We do this by examining highly concentrated low-income racial urban segregation based on our research in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Our previous research focused on the role that accumulated trauma and negative life events played in the rebuilding process and future prospects for low-income New Orleans residents (Hawkins, 2009). We also examined social capital (Hawkins & Maurer, 2009) and the reconstruction of ontological security as factors in relocation (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011). One other analysis focused on racial and gender dynamics as barriers to data collection (Hawkins, 2010). In this current analysis we examine the possibility of race as a significant factor in the lives of New Orleans residents, but one that is concentrically connected to poverty in mezzo level interactions. This analysis adds to the literature by continuing to unravel the complexity and relationship of race and class, especially among those who are low-income. We give voice to that complexity by showing how those most affected by the connection of race and poverty makes sense of their experiences.

The essence of Wilson's (1978) argument in *The Declining Significance of Race* is that with shifting economic and post-civil rights socio-political structures, that which had previously deprived African Americans as a group access to resources and opportunities, now oppresses a subset: the economic "under-class," rather than an entire race. Thus, according to Wilson (1978), class structure has a greater impact on individual African Americans' life chances than race. Wilson (1978) posits that the structural barriers that have developed in the modern industrial era "have racial significance in their consequences, not in their origins" (p. 142). The origins, in his view, are class oppression, which disproportionately affects poor African Americans, but does not target them as a population, as did

previous racially-driven economic policies.

We posit that our qualitative data, as well as recent census data analyses, support Wilson's (1978) contention that for the poorest African Americans, race and class are inextricably linked and function as a structural barrier to accessing wealth, resources, and opportunities (Lin, 2001). Though the outright racial agenda targeting African Americans as a group may have dissipated, the consequences of being Black today remain similar to what they were prior to the end of legal segregation in the U.S. for poor African Americans as a group. One serious consequence of this structural racism means more than simply having little money. Rather, structural racism has manifested itself as poverty, producing a significant lack of resources that hampers opportunities and self-determination that affect life chances, choices, and even health (Hawkins, 2009).

## Literature Review

### *Structural Barriers: The Intersectionality of Race and Class*

Wilson (1996) and others (Rank, Yoon, & Hirschl, 2003) assert that post-Civil Rights Era chronic concentrated poverty developed largely as a result of the movement of industries that historically provided sustainable living wage jobs from the inner city to the suburbs. This out-migration had a devastating and long-term effect on cities and their residents. The middle class followed industry to the suburbs, taking resources and social and cultural capital with them. In the wake of the depletion of resources, together with a steady decline in real wages, the inner city could not sustain its economy. As a result of unemployment, poor schools, high levels of crime and an underground economy developed. Governments, banks, and businesses no longer invested in these highly racially segregated communities. These patterns prompted Wilson (1996) and others to describe the resulting inner city communities as a permanent "underclass."

The structural perspective maintains that poverty is the result of larger shortcomings found in the structure of society that generate adverse effects on multiple dimensions biopsychosocially. Institutional racism is a structural shortcoming that has had a long lasting effect on individuals and

communities. Thus, urban areas with high levels of economic and racial segregation are representative of negative consequences of the structural intersectionality of race and class (Conley, 1999; Crenshaw, 1994; Wilson, 1996).

Wealth and asset development, for example, is almost entirely absent from poverty reduction policies. Yet research findings suggest that wealth accumulation is related to sustaining economic security in low-income minority populations, just as it has done historically for middle and upper income families (Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006; Rank et al., 2003). Conley (1999) explores the interaction of race and wealth, concluding that lack of wealth is a more significant impediment to accessing resources and opportunities for African Americans than Whites. Further, even when wealth and access to resources and opportunities are accumulated by African Americans, it is at a rate that is significantly less than for Whites. Whiteness garners a higher salary above and beyond education in the U.S. (Adelman, 2004; Pattillo, 2005; Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

Hardaway and McLoyd (2009) studied the transition out of poverty and the intersection with race in this process. Their data show stark differences on multiple measures between African Americans and their white counter-parts as they transition from poverty to middle-class status. They attempt to identify "linkages between individual, family, community, and structural factors related to social mobility for African Americans" (p. 243) that have shown disadvantage for the poorest African Americans, as well as a compromised middle class. The authors found that more members per African American family contribute to household income totals than white family members; African Americans work on average an additional 12 weeks to gain the equivalent income of a white family. Further, as a result of the disproportionate number of African Americans growing up poor, even when they reach the middle class, they are more likely than Whites to have siblings still living in poverty with whom they share their income (Chiteji & Hamilton, 2002; Heflin & Pattillo, 2006). This reality limits financial accumulation for African Americans and may inhibit the ability to transition to or maintain middle class income levels (Avery & Rendall, 2002). Hardaway and

McLoyd (2009) also found that African Americans born into poverty are three times as likely to remain poor in adulthood as their non-poor peers.

*Pre-Hurricane Katrina Structural Inequality*

Much has been written since Hurricane Katrina depicting New Orleans as a “weak city” (Liu & Plyer, 2010b) prior to 2005 and its status as such having contributed to the magnitude of the disaster. In addition to high economic and racial segregation, New Orleans had a tenuous and underserved infrastructure, a poor public transportation system, especially to the poorest neighborhoods, high spatial mismatch (distance between industry and residential sectors), ineffective government, and other structural issues (Barnshaw & Trainor, 2007; Berube & Katz, 2005; Bullard & Wright, 2007; Dyson, 2006; Rodríguez, Trainor, & Quarantelli, 2006). Income and race were inextricably enmeshed and bound African Americans to an economic destiny beyond which few were able to move.

Despite prosperous tourist districts, prior to Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans had a poverty rate of 27 percent, almost twice the national average of 12 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The poverty rate among Black families is far higher, with 35 percent living in poverty compared to 11 percent for white families. Education attainment, which can reflect a community’s socio-economic status, showed disparities as well. The adult population that held less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education was greater than the population that had completed graduate school (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). New Orleans also had one of the highest levels of concentrated poverty in the country, falling only behind Fresno, California.

Concentrated poverty is defined by geographic areas in which the poverty rate is more than 40 percent. Thirty-eight percent of the city neighborhoods experienced concentrated poverty, the highest of any city in the South. Orleans Parish, inner-city New Orleans, was defined by high concentrated racial segregation (68% African American) and high unemployment (50% for African Americans compared to 24% for Whites) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Spatial mismatch was high pre-Katrina as well and has been increasing nationally for African Americans (Stoll & Raphael, 2001). In 1980, 56 percent

of industry employment was in Orleans Parish; today this is down to 34 percent (Liu & Plyer, 2010b). Further, housing was substandard in the parish with a high rate of rental units, 56 percent of which flooded (Berube & Katz, 2005).

*Urban Racially Segregated Poverty Post-Hurricane Katrina*

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, approximately 1.3 million people were evacuated to shelters, homes, and private residences in all 50 U.S. states (Nasser & Overberg, 2005). Media outlets and researchers alike suggested that the near destruction and diaspora of New Orleans presented an opportunity for the city to “do better” (Liu & Plyer, 2010a). What doing better means in practical terms has come to signify, for many, reducing the racial economic disparity so evident in media images and in the data.

A recent analysis of socio-economic and political recovery of New Orleans five years after Hurricane Katrina produced by the Brookings Institute and the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center (GNOCDC) (Liu & Plyer, 2010a, b) states “new evidence shows that greater New Orleans is emerging as a healthier, more resilient region.” The data that show improvements are largely aggregated across the New Orleans metropolitan area, which includes wealthier, predominantly White parishes that suffered less damage as a result of Hurricane Katrina. As the report notes (Liu & Plyer, 2010a), New Orleans and the Gulf coast have also been battered by the 2007 financial crisis and the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Thus, while current data do not reflect purely the long-term impact of Hurricane Katrina, they do reflect the reproduction of structural barriers such as Wilson (1978; 2010; Wilson & Taub, 2006) posits would constrain the Black urban poor from recovering on par with Whites. An example of this can be found in the data that highlight areas most affected by the storm and most reflective of pre-Katrina high economic and racial segregation, such as Orleans Parish. These data show that Blacks/African Americans trail all other ethnic groups in recovery in virtually all categories (Liu & Plyer, 2010b).

The Brookings/GNOCDC data analysis, primarily collected in 2008 (see Liu & Plyer, 2010b for detailed data sources), shows Blacks/African Americans in New Orleans behind in all

significant areas of positive life outcomes. The median income for White New Orleans metro area is higher than the national average, \$58,234 to \$56,826 respectively. For Blacks/African Americans in New Orleans, median income is not only below local and national averages for Whites and Latinos/Hispanics, it is also below the national average for Blacks/African Americans, \$32,179 to \$35,425 respectively. Blacks/African Americans fare poorly in higher education as well, with only 13 percent having completed college compared to the more than double figure of 29 percent for Whites. Aggregated proportions of income measured by low, lower middle, middle, upper middle and high held steady across greater New Orleans from 1979-2008. Whites and Latino/Hispanic populations showed slight decreases in the lower incomes and slight increases in the middle and upper incomes. For Blacks/African Americans, the opposite was true: while there was no change in the proportion of middle income households, the proportion of poor households increased and the proportion of wealthier households decreased. The poverty rate of Orleans Parish, home to a high concentration (62%) of Blacks/African Americans, has fluctuated slightly over the past three decades and is at its lowest since 1979 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). However, the percentage of the population in the parish who are poor (23%) is double that of the larger New Orleans metropolitan area (11%) and almost double the national average (13%) (Liu & Plyer, 2010b).

An unexplored aspect of these statistics is the economic status of the more than 100,000 individuals who have not returned to New Orleans post-Katrina. The population of Orleans Parish in 2008 was only slightly more than half of what it was in 1999 (Liu & Plyer, 2010b). Have those who have not returned found an escape from the high levels of racial and economic segregation of the parish or have they perhaps been too poor to return and rebuild? Nearly 64,000 unoccupied addresses remained in the parish as of March 2010. In addition, Orleans Parish outstrips other parishes and the New Orleans metro area in both property and violent crime (Liu & Plyer, 2010b).

The intersectionality of race and poverty is not only seen in the latest U.S. Census Bureau literature, but it is heard in the



voices of the New Orleans population as well. The literature suggests that racial disparities are historical and structural in New Orleans, existing prior to the storm and continuing thereafter. In this study, we give voice to some residents' perceptions of their lives prior to and following Hurricane Katrina. In their own words, they explain to what extent race and its intersectionality with income level/class was significant.

## Method

This study uses a longitudinal methodology with a qualitative, grounded study design (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1994). The data collection included responses to semi-structured questions, combining a grounded study approach and directed interviews (Padgett, 1998) to better understand specific experiences and place them in context.

### *Sampling and Recruitment*

The sample for this study consisted of 40 ( $N = 40$ ) heads of households or individuals with primary childcare responsibilities. These families had school-age children and had been affected by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The demographic makeup of the sample was 78 percent African American, 18 percent White, 2 percent other (Asian and American Indian), and 2 percent who did not identify their race, but appeared to be either Black or African American. The age range was 18 to 63 years (mean age 41). Thirty four of the participants were female, and six male. The number of children ranged from 1 to 5, with an average of 2. Nineteen participants identified as low-income, ten as working class or lower middle class, eight as middle class, and one as upper middle class. Thirty of the families received some kind of public assistance for themselves or their children.

### *Procedures*

Participants for this study were drawn primarily through a "snowball" sample approach but also from Federal Management Emergency Administration (FEMA) and American Red Cross databases and telephone records of evacuees. Participants included the heads of households in

families with school-age children. Data collection consisted of two life history interviews, which included experiences leading up to and following Hurricane Katrina, and current life situations. The interviews were approximately six months apart and each lasted an average of two hours. Some participants received additional follow-up visits or telephone calls when necessary to clarify statements or to fill in information about their experiences. Each interview was conducted at a setting chosen by the participant, which may have been their own residence, their workplace, a FEMA-provided mobile home, or a suitable public space.

In addition to using traditional grounded theory methodology for qualitative data collection (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1994; Padgett, 1998), we also used ethnographic techniques that included serving as participant observers between interviews, volunteering with the clean-up efforts in New Orleans, and spending time with some participants at community events, their workplaces or places of worship (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The process of data collection also included building relationships with key informants and community leaders, in addition to study participants.

All participants gave informed consent and received \$40 per family for the original interview and \$30 for the follow-up. Interviews were conducted by the study PI and four graduate-level qualitative interviewers. During the first interview, participants were asked about their lives prior to and following Hurricane Katrina. Demographic data were collected and participants were asked to discuss their life situations before, during, and following the hurricane. Participants were specifically asked about their experiences relocating and settling into their new environment, and their readjustment process returning to New Orleans, when that was applicable.

Following the model suggested by Padgett (2007), the second interview was individually tailored for each respondent. It was designed to learn about changes in the participants' lives since the last interview, fill in gaps, verify events, clarify uncertainties, and to follow-up on certain details. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim and field notes were also compared and analyzed. Researchers participated in written and oral debriefings following each

interview. Multiple coders read several transcripts and developed a systematic coding scheme for the data. Each transcript was analyzed for preliminary themes using open coding, with researchers developing a list of categories and concepts, developing primary and secondary coding through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Later, several themes and patterns were identified through selective coding.

## Results

The intersectionality of race and class was a major issue for the study participants, with heads of households directly or indirectly stating that it was a significant factor for them. In some cases race and racism were a blatant element, while in other examples race itself and the interaction between race and class appeared more subtle. While all of the African American participants stated that race played a major role in their experiences with Hurricane Katrina, many Whites also saw race as a major element. While at times participants placed race as a key factor, the analysis of these data show that both race and class were extremely relevant for participants from both historical and current perspectives. Most participants, however, strongly placed great emphasis on race and racial dynamics, with class either existing as a subtext or sharing center stage. Study participants did not always distinguish race from poverty. Four consistent themes emerged that suggest that for many of the families affected by Hurricane Katrina, race and class significantly impacted their experiences. These factors included experiences: (1) immediately following the devastation; (2) during relocation to other communities; (3) during the rebuilding process; and (4) historically and currently in the structure of New Orleans.

### *Experiences Immediately Following the Devastation*

Shortly following Hurricane Katrina, stories began to appear in the media regarding murders, shootings, and looting within the Morial Convention Center, in the New Orleans Superdome, and within communities where some people still resided (Vergano, 2010). Some of these were true, including stories of dead bodies left for days (Brinkley, 2006), while others were false, such as babies being raped, but nearly all

had overtones that suggested race and poverty were factors (Dyson, 2006; Thompson, 2008). Whether true or false, study participants discussed their own perceptions and experiences that involved race and its intersection with class (whether implicit or explicit) to a strong degree. At the request of study participants, some of their names have been changed in our presentation, but no other facts were altered. Linda, an African American grandmother raising her two grandchildren, said that race played a major role for her and her family members when they were in the Convention Center before being bused to Houston.

Everybody was in there and it seemed like the Black people were treated the worse ... that hurt. It really hurts. And then they treated us like we were animals and not human beings ... the police and the national armed guards ... I mean they would talk to you like you was a dog. If you had to go to the restroom, and the, ah, in the Convention Center, they would put guns on you and ask you where you going and I don't think that was right. I mean we didn't have any weapons.

Linda's perception is similar to that of DaShawn, an African American man who was in the Superdome with his sister while the rest of their family evacuated to Memphis. DaShawn sees more of a racial element, making no distinction with class. He does, however, observe that there was a lack of resources that were controlled by Whites available to African Americans:

I think it was a racial thing, definitely ... You gonna let all those Black people wait. See what if they would have been all White people? How many damn White people would have been down here with those buses, greyhound, helicopters you name it? Won't no White people waiting.

Even study participants who had left the city, but watched the events unfold in the media, said that they responded to the impact of race on the poor individuals displayed on television. David, a White father of two, said that when he was watching the events of Hurricane Katrina his mind went to racism.

I am not the first person to bring up racism and such, but I do think that there was a reason some people couldn't leave. People in the Lower Nine are poor, outside the Lower Nine too ... some folks may have been neglectful, but what they did to people weren't right ... (The Government) knew it weren't right ... You just don't do that to people.

What happened to those in the Superdome and Convention Center seemed to set a tone for how study participants viewed their experiences, with many saying their personal experiences sent a clear message. They also felt that other experiences sent similar messages. African American study participants recalled an incident in Jefferson Parish, a predominately White and middle income community adjacent to Orleans Parish. Jefferson Parish became familiar in the media when, a few days following the Hurricane Katrina, local law enforcement officers set up armed roadblocks to halt the passage of hundreds of New Orleans residents attempting to cross the Crescent City Connection Bridge from Orleans Parish (Harris, 2005; Witt, 2008). Others recalled the widely reported shooting of unarmed Black men by local police officers a few days following the storm. While some White residents in Jefferson Parish praised the actions of the Sheriff Department and the importance of protecting property (see Hawkins, 2010), African American residents saw it another way: "I get mad just thinking about that," said one study participant. This father had not attempted to cross into Jefferson Parish, but stayed and slept on the bridge for several days with his family. "Here we are just trying to survive. Trying to live ... and they shooting at us, making everything worser than it was."

For some, the interaction of race and poverty within the experience of Katrina offered a lens by which to understand what happened to them following the storm, for better or for worse. For others, it seemed to confirm what they already knew about life as minorities in New Orleans and the rest of the United States.

#### *Racism in the Rebuilding Process*

In other studies, we have identified racism and the lack of privilege as consistent themes in people's early experiences

following Hurricane Katrina (Hawkins, 2009). Shortly after the storms and into the rebuilding process, stories about racial violence spread throughout the city (Vergano, 2010). Several participants had specific ideas about how race and class played a role in these stories. There were real experiences to go along with the media stories and community rumors.

Some spoke of specific stories that they had heard. One African American community leader in his late twenties spoke about rumors he had heard about racial killings in Algiers, a racially mixed, largely middle class community in the area.

It is open season on Black folks ... Shot one brother point blank. Young man. They killed him, dead ... In Algiers. ... Right across the River. ... You know white folks will start shooting when they think they losing something ... They will do anything to protect what's theirs. They *will* start shootin' niggas. (Hawkins, 2010, p. 251)

Other study participants spoke about their lived experiences during their attempts at rebuilding. Carla, an African American woman whose family received welfare benefits, but described herself as "middle class" because she owned her home, said that she had experiences being kept out of her home because she did not look like she lived in a middle class community, issues that she feels directly are related to her race and class. She described returning to her neighborhood, a mixed-income community, but the police would not let her beyond the street barrier because she did not have the right identification.

They were letting everybody else through, whether they had the right ID or not. Who had the right ID? I had nothing, but a few things. I had just moved (before Hurricane Katrina) and my ID had an address in East New Orleans ... I keep telling them I just moved and they still won't let me in ... The next day I came back and this time the National Guard or something was out there, not New Orleans police and he let me right through. I told him I had just moved and my address was different, and he was like 'You have a nice day, Ma'am.'

Carla said that some streets had barriers and others did not, but she was not sure why hers did. She suspected because the neighborhood was considered "middle class" and not poor. Carla's neighborhood is known as Gentilly. Gentilly is a mixed-race and mixed-income community that proved to be extremely resourceful in mobilizing residents in the rebuilding process following the storms. Residents from other areas, however, did not always feel so empowered. One participant, a hairdresser in the lower Uptown area, one of the poorest neighborhoods in the city and a predominately African American area, spoke to the common theme that the government was not interested in rebuilding the city beyond the white prosperous areas.

They are not going to rebuild. They do not care. Listen, it has been two years since Katrina. Look at the French Quarter, look at the Garden District. They look fine, and those that don't got construction going on. I'm still fighting with the insurance company ... but look up the street, look at the Lower Nine. Who lives where we live? Who lives in the Garden District?

Even when interviewed two years later, study participants continued to feel that their race played a role in what was happening in financing the rebuilding process in the city. Ernestine, an African American mother of three children and a grandmother, stood with a small group of worshipers at a Black church located in East New Orleans. They echoed a sentiment that had already been articulated by the church's pastor during an earlier interview.

We have to rebuild for ourselves, because they will not rebuild for us. They do not want us to come back ... and by us, you know who I am talking about, people who look like you and me (pointing to the interviewer, who is African American). Look at what they are trying to do to our people ... It is no mistake that they look just like you and me.

Like the women in this group, Ernestine expressed the sense that not only did race matter, but her skin color specifically excluded her and people who looked like her from

resources and opportunities for rebuilding. Participants in this study also experienced this exclusion outside of New Orleans, in locations where they relocated following the storm.

*Experiences Related to Race and Class in Communities Where Residents Relocated*

All participants at least temporarily left the city either prior to or immediately following the storm. As we have reported elsewhere (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011), for many of them, leaving the city was a first time experience. For some participants even ending up in a particular city was a shock, as participants described being placed on buses and in some cases planes, traveling for several hours and hundreds, if not thousands, of miles from home. Said one participant about entering a rural Texas town, "I was like, Sweet Jesus, where am I now?" Participants expressed multiple and mixed feelings about their experiences while outside of New Orleans. Some spoke fondly of the places they had temporarily lived, while others reflected on their struggles, especially at first, when race was a factor. Most of the comments centered on White people in other communities expressing their stereotypes about African Americans, people in poverty, and those from New Orleans.

Nickeema described as an adventure how she and her extended family left the city the day before the storm and for several weeks pooled their money until they received space and resources from FEMA and the American Red Cross. The family encountered racial microaggressions in their attempt to find a hotel room:

This motel was remodeling or something ... nobody was there. And once we got in there, everybody on the highway started following up in. It was empty when we got there ... Some doors looked like they didn't even have locks on them. You didn't care. We was tired of being on the highway all that time ... And then after they say they got no room. So we bout to go off! Come on. You think about it. You have to remember we weren't neat and debonair as we are now. We didn't look like this. Hair all stickin' up, kinda pushin' it down. Men all ... they just tired so they lookin' rough. That man was going to tell us they didn't have no room. You got thirty



angry Black folks and you think they going to tell them they didn't have no rooms and I don't see anybody in this hotel. Oh you got a room and if you don't you gonna make one real quick. So we kinda bogarted our way into the hotel. We stayed there for two days. And then the managers watched us the whole time ... And then they turned the water off!

Lucy, an African American woman who had been relocated to Alexandria, Virginia following the floods, said that she lived in a church for a month, until she was kicked out over what she feels was a racial incident involving a White evacuee.

Alexandria was Hell! I lived in a church ... but they told me I had to leave because this white woman accused me of stealing her purse. Which was a lie! This woman was a gambler, gambled the whole time we was there ... She wanted more money from FEMA so she had to say her things were stolen ... the Pastor believed her! I left after that and lived in a storage unit for two weeks.

The idea of the evacuees as criminals, undesirables or increasing crime rates in cities, was a consistent theme among study participants. These perceptions were also expressed in the national media, especially in Houston (Moreno, 2006), but were then reported to have never occurred (Pinkerton, 2010). In an earlier study, we described African American New Orleans residents who felt harassed or mistreated by residents in other communities (Hawkins & Maurer, 2009). For example, Larry, a 27-year-old African American father of two, said about his experience in Memphis, Tennessee:

Red Cross said I won't from New Orleans ... Where I'm from then? ... I was harassed by the police, called a pimp, a drug dealer. I was arrested and I never done anything bad in my life ... I'm still tryin' to clear that up ... I wish I'd never walked in that room ... (pp. 1787-1788).

Robin described how in a community near Denver, African Americans and "poor white folks" were fenced in what she called "a prison," with armed guards. They took daily shopping bus trips to points in town, such as Target.

I ain't lying, there was armed guards. Like you in prison or some movie or some concentration camp. They even call it Camp Katrina ... We even had lock down. Grown people; responsible adults treated like they ain't nothing but common criminals. They all nice and everything at first and then they give you the rules. I'm like 'Sweet Lord, where I'm at? What I did?'

While most participants spoke of blatant racial incidents as they intersected with class, Jenna, an African American mother who evacuated with her husband and daughter to Houston, described several racially microaggressive experiences. She said that while people were initially nice, her family soon experienced subtle comments that she felt were geared toward her race and status as a Katrina evacuee from New Orleans. Jenna suggested that many people made assumptions about her family, their race, and socio-economic levels. One such assumption came from her daughter's teacher.

When we first came, people were like "welcome!" But, now, it's not really real. We have a lot of negativity coming from people, you know, soon as I open my mouth. 'You from New Orleans, I can tell.' You know, it's our accent. And, believe it or not, it matters. They treat you different once they find out you're from New Orleans. You see a lot of negative things. Like my girl's teacher told her that she needs to be glad that she's here because she was living in poverty in New Orleans. She don't know how she was living. We don't have everything, but we weren't living in poverty.

Michelle is a White mother of one child who also made note of the differences in treatment of African Americans, including pointing out what she believed were the racist and biased messages in what was being said on the news.

So once we get the rabbit ears, I'm watching the news. I had to stop watching the local news. Cause basically the lead story on every news cast in Baton Rouge every night was, 'look what other trash from New Orleans the storm has brought in.' They didn't have to come out and say what they were really saying ... They don't have to say anything because, well, you know, they say

to you, and they don't say it. You know, it's that kind of thing, but it's racism. Every white person knows the cues that other white people use.

While most of the study participants discussed their experiences and those of others, many tried to make sense of what happened after Katrina from a historical and structural perspective. What they saw was that the current trauma fit into a pattern that they or those close to them had experienced before the storm came through.

*Historical, Current, and Structural Nature of Racism and Classism in New Orleans*

During various stages of the interviews, African American study participants shared that Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent floods fit into a larger context of the negative intersection of race and class. It was consistent among African Americans that their experience ran deeper than Hurricane Katrina. One African American man noted: "Katrina ain't nothing new ... This is what they do. They would never have left white folks like that. No food, no water, nowhere to go" (Hawkins, 2010, p. 252).

Opal, a mother with three children, felt that Katrina was a larger issue that came from the White House and George W. Bush, who was U.S. President at the time, which had racial overtones.

I thought it was a racial thing. But Bush you wrong for that. He wrong for that. Got us going through here, just like that little rapper that was talking about the Hurricane Katrina victims, Kanye West. He said Bush do not like Black people. Yeah, that. It's true to me ... Bush, he ain't playin' with our nigga lives.

One recurring conversation among African American participants particularly was the nature of the destruction of the levees surrounding New Orleans. While not all participants believed that the levees were blown up, many participants either discussed it as at least a possibility or were certain that local, state, or federal government officials were responsible.

Some of this discussion is analyzed by Hawkins (2010) in an article that focuses on residents' beliefs about racial politics, but a common theme remains in the belief that: (1) the government destroyed the levees, especially those surrounding the Ninth Ward to save the French Quarter; and (2) this reflects a consistent pattern of racism and classism inherent in the power structure of New Orleans.

One study participant gave this analysis of the situation:

You know what my idea is? That they wanted that land. And my idea is that they broke the levees. They did it in Betsy, they did it in '27 and I believe they did it again. Because I had people that were there when the storm passed through, the city wasn't flooded. It didn't flood till afterwards. They broke the levees ... they know where the Black people live ... I truly believe they broke the levees. I know for sure that they do it. I know some people who live near the 17<sup>th</sup> Street Canal and they heard an explosion and then the water came.

Others' sentiments followed similar patterns, some based on what they heard and others believed that this is simply part of the historical racist pattern of New Orleans and the larger society. As documented in Hawkins (2009, 2010), New Orleans residents had already experienced a series of negative life events, many of them related to racial and economic health disparities and traumatic events. An understanding of this reality was expressed by Donna, who was an advocate for local housing projects, several of which were closed after the Hurricane.

First of all, they should not have shut down all the housing projects. That would have afforded a lot of people to go back home. Number two, those of us who did not live in housing projects, like myself and my family and thousands of others, they should have had hotels, remember when we first got here, a lot of people lived in hotels? Why didn't they make hotels available for us to immediately come back home? Funny how, White people got in shelters and hotels and I don't mean no Superdome!

Claire, a White private school teacher in her mid-40s suggests, too, that the events of Hurricane Katrina were bigger than they seem and, for her, the race-class interaction inherent in the storm and floods, centered on the schools.

Naomi Klein, in that book, *Shock Doctrine* explains it. The conservatives have been trying to get rid of New Orleans public schools for I do not know how many years ... She said that Katrina provided a laboratory for charter schools ... they got what they wanted. It's the same way with the housing projects ... They have been trying to get rid of the housing projects for years. So Katrina gave them that chance too. You will not see them messing with anything in the Garden District, in Lakeview, or anywhere where White people are ... where there is power.

Finally, Jim, an African American father and grandfather who lost family members in the floods, insisted that White people had a historical plan to undermine and pit African Americans against each other, describing in detail a historical plan of domination (Hawkins, 2010, p. 252). He insisted that racism played a key role in what was happening to African Americans, especially those who are low-income and lacked resources. Jim stressed that if African Americans and other minorities wait for White people to provide the resources and opportunities to rebuild, the structural disadvantage will be reproduced.

Man, that what we been doing waiting on the White man to change things, fighting with each other and waiting ... They (Whites) ain't giving up nothing not if they can help it.

## Discussion

An early debate among media pundits included the question of whether the outcomes of Hurricane Katrina were due to poverty or race (Dyson, 2006). In this study, the perception of the structural nature of racism and income disparity is apparent in our findings. The residents of New Orleans experienced this intersectionality at multiple stages of Hurricane

Katrina and see it in the historical and contemporary fiber of the city. They also see race as intertwined within their lives, hardly ever separating it from their daily struggles, let alone their experiences related to Hurricane Katrina. The residents' words, together with data from the U.S. Census analysis (Liu & Plyer, 2010a, 2010b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006), strongly suggest that race and racism are important factors in the lives of New Orleans residents. But it is especially the intermixing of race and poverty in New Orleans that had a negative impact in 2005 and this is a pattern that continues to reproduce itself. One lesson we learn from this and previous studies (Hawkins, 2009, 2010; Hawkins & Maurer, 2009) is that in New Orleans, both prior to and following Hurricane Katrina, the structural issues of race mixed with poverty, a history of trauma, psychological problems, and limited resources serve as barriers to economic, social, and educational opportunities.

The simple understanding of Wilson's (1978) thesis that income has surpassed race among African Americans has not been shown to be the case in the literature, nor specifically in the reality of New Orleans for these study participants. The more nuanced component of Wilson's early work does play out in New Orleans, however, in which an "underclass" has developed due to structural failings, neighborhood economic and racial segregation, and lack of access to jobs, education, and opportunities. The findings in this current study should be examined alongside Sampson and Sharkey (2008), who studied the reproduction of racially and economically segregated neighborhoods. Their data show consistent patterns of reproduction of socio-economic structure at the neighborhood level, including recycling of barriers that limit access to resources, wealth and opportunities that wealth provides. While society can point to many advances among African Americans since the publication of Wilson's (1978) classic work, economic, health, and mental health outcomes continue to display major disparities (Aber, Jones, & Cohen, 2005; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Maritato, 1997; Farah et al., 2006; Shonkoff, 2003). Research tells us that even when controlling for income, racism emerges as a major source of stress for minority populations. African Americans, for example, are more likely to have one of the top three fatal medical conditions, and die at an earlier age than

Whites. These differences have been directly linked to racism and discrimination (Din-Dzietham, Nembhard, Collins, & Davis, 2004; Lantz, House, Mero, & Williams, 2005; Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003). Adding poverty to the mix only makes matters worse, as racism and discrimination are accompanied by life- and health-threatening stressors (Lantz et al., 2005; Williams, 2005).

As Wilson (2010) has clarified his earlier analysis over the years, he argues for a holistic approach that incorporates both structural and cultural factors. García Coll et al. (1996) propose a similar approach in "considering social position and social stratification as distal contributors to developmental processes" (p. 243). Hardaway and McLoyd (2009) combine the materialist conceptualization of socioeconomic status, which emphasizes "income as a source of inequality," focusing on outcomes related to family and individual financial resources, with a social class model that emphasizes "'cultural, structural, and institutional factors' and non-economic resources that contribute to inequality" (p. 243).

Given the findings of this study, a similar approach is suggested here, in which the interventions at both the policy and practice levels are holistic in nature, but perhaps pay even greater attention to race and cultural factors than others suggest. Current policy approaches disaster relief and the rebuilding of New Orleans from a perspective that ignores the impact of structural racial and economic segregation. In fact, structural factors are ignored over individual behavioral issues, using a bootstrap mentality even when there is compelling information that race and class are key factors, such as in studies focusing on health disparities (Williams, 2005). Social capital is a good rubric for understanding the complexity of the interaction between individual-level and structural-level issues, which we see in mezzo-level interactions where the individual and institutional meet. Looking at mezzo-level interactions can be helpful in understanding the interaction of race and economic status (Hawkins & Maurer, 2011).

### Implications

What practitioners and policymakers failed to explore following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans was the substantial

role that structural racism and classism played in what millions of television viewers saw on their screens and in the aftermath that included relocation and rebuilding. Despite being slow to respond following Hurricane Katrina, the federal government eventually paid billions of dollars for relief efforts (Comfort, Birkland, Cigler, & Nance, 2010). Agencies were supported, homes were restored, and even college funds were established to help victims. All of this and more was necessary to help the communities, but little was done to address directly or indirectly the structural racism that study participants and many experts have blamed for the floods and their aftermath (Dyson, 2006; Jones-Deweever & Hartmann, 2006).

Affirmative action policies that existed in greater numbers when Wilson (1978) first wrote the *Declining Significance of Race* are no longer part of standard employment. Few economic empowerment or educational policies consider correcting racism in any form in their development or implementation. It is Wilson (2010) himself who decades later notes:

Despite the obvious fact that structural changes have adversely affected inner-city neighborhoods, there is a widespread notion in America that the problems plaguing people in the inner city have little to do with racial discrimination or the effects of segregated poverty. (p. 203)

Further still, the public sentiment has moved away from race as a focus to broader identity issues, such as gay and lesbian marriage, breaking the glass ceiling for women in the professional world, and poverty in developing countries. Wise (2009) suggests that race has become a dirty word in politics, with even an African American President choosing to talk around racial tensions or hold photo-ops characterized as a "beer summit" following a conflict between an African American professor and White police officer, rather than hold a real discussion about structural race issues and racism.

The lack of a conversation about race exacerbates the disenfranchisement of those who are people of color and low-income. As David, the White father of two in this study described, it is difficult to believe that the government did not know what was happening to a specific set of people. But what



is perhaps more relevant is that if policymakers believe that race does not matter, or that income alone is a major factor, then only one aspect of the issues that reproduce minority poverty is addressed, thus perpetuating disenfranchisement.

From a practice perspective, for reasons of mission clarity, organizational effectiveness, funding, and often pragmatism, agencies rarely engage a critical race perspective in their work. Instead, agencies focus on issues that have race as a major theme without addressing race itself. One exception to this was, in fact, in New Orleans. In an earlier study, many study participants mentioned the organization Common Ground as playing a role in helping them (Hawkins & Maurer, 2009). This group is closely linked to the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond, which incorporates a critical race analysis in its work through their national program, "Undoing Racism." Agencies are beginning to adopt these efforts, including private agencies, universities and school systems. This focus on eliminating racism also has a place in the practice world, where anti-racism is a growing movement (Smith, Constantin, Graham, & Dize, 2008).

## Conclusion

The perception of the structural nature of the intersectionality of race and class/income is apparent in the findings of this study. It is also apparent in data from the general literature and the U.S. Census. The residents of New Orleans experienced this interaction at multiple stages of Hurricane Katrina. They also saw it in the historical and contemporary fiber of the city. In fact, race and income as concomitant factors among these study participants run deeply, with few separating their lived experiences of race from that of poverty. In many cases, neither current policy nor practice acknowledge race as a factor in developing and planning interventions. Approaches that recognize and address the significance and intersectionality of race and poverty would be a step towards preventing the disproportionate results of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.

## Limitations

This study is limited by our non-probability sampling method and small sample size. The experiences that

participants shared with the interviewers for this study only represent some of the experiences of New Orleans residents and evacuees, thus generalization is not possible. The intention of this and other qualitative studies, however, is not to produce a reproductive sample of the New Orleans population affected by Hurricane Katrina. Rather, an in-depth and longitudinal analysis using grounded theory methodology allows us to generate theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It is also important to note that when these experiences occurred, participants may have been under heavy stress, thus affecting their memories and perceptions. While a concern, the data collection and analysis used are designed to capture the reality of participants' experiences. Finally, the importance of these findings is how participants understand their experiences, rather than the actual facts of particular events.

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This ends the special issue contents.